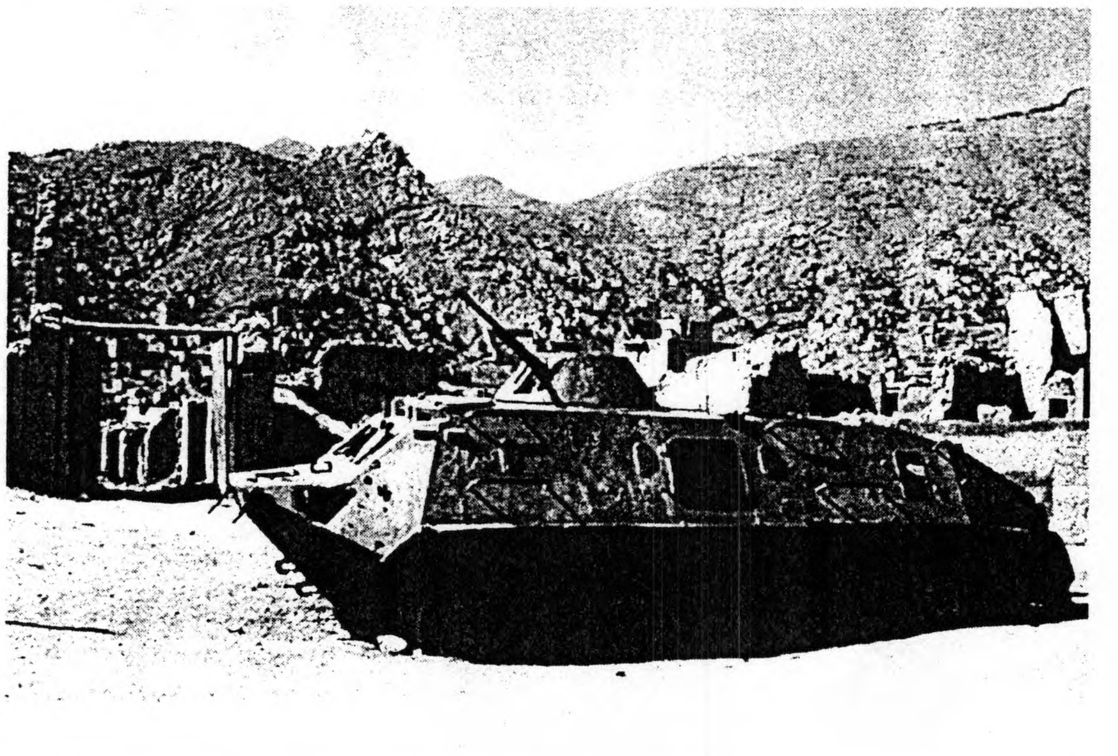
Kabul – a city that never was

Reflections on the revitalization of the Old City

Marcus Schadl

Die Altstadt von Kabul ist die historische Mitte einer Stadt, die sich seit dem Fall der Taliban in einem tiefgehenden Wandel hin zu einer kontrastreichen, dynamischen Metropole befindet. Der vorliegende Artikel stellt in Frage, ob die kriegszerstörte Altstadt, wie von offizieller Seite vorgeschlagen, zu einem attraktiven und funktionierenden Zentrum erblühen kann. Dafür werden drei Gründe vorgestellt: Erstens, der überkommene bauliche und soziale Zustand: Bereits bevor die Wohnviertel in den Kämpfen vor zehn Jahren entvölkert und in Schutt gelegt wurden, waren diese heruntergekommen. Das ursprüngliche Sozialgefüge war kaum mehr erhalten. Zweitens, die Marginalisierung Alt-Kabuls: Im Rahmen eines eigendynamischen Entwicklungsprozesses sind längst neue Zentren und Subzentren im weiten Stadtgefüge gewachsen. Der historischen Stadt blieb dabei lediglich die Rolle eines indigenen Handelsplatzes und eines Warenlagers. Drittens, die mangelnde Eignung der alten Stadt als Mitte eines „modernen" Kabuls: Sowohl das Bauwesen als auch das Sozialleben der Altstadt hatten im Laufe einer wenig mehr als zweihundertjährigen Geschichte niemals wirklich ausgeprägt urbane Züge angenommen. Als im frühen 20. Jahrhundert Kabul zögerlich den Anschluss an Modernisierung und Industrialisierung fand, schien die traditionelle Stadt mit dieser Entwicklung unvereinbar. Wiederholt wurde die Altstadt übergangen, ignoriert und aufgegeben. Alt-Kabul bietet sich folglich kaum dazu an, das Herz einer Mega-Stadt zu werden. Es bleibt aber zu hoffen, dass sich durch einfühlsame Konservierung und Instandsetzung des verbliebenen historischen Baubestands sowie durch Verbesserung der Lebensumstände eine Brücke in die Geschichte der Stadt erhalten lässt und dass die Viertel nachhaltig belebt werden.

Kabul, today, is in many ways a paradox. It is the metropolis of a war wrecked Afghanistan, and yet it hardly functions as a city at all. The growth of the city has been enormous. Even four years after the fall of the Taliban regime there is still no reliable estimate of the capital's population. Possibly three or four million Kabulis huddle together in a rapidly changing city. About a quarter of a century ago, this figure had not even reached a million. Many old-established Kabulis left their city after the disastrous coup d'état by the communists, many of whom left themselves only a decade later. The population eventually dropped to a few hundred thousand during the dark period of the inter-factional fighting in the early 1990s. By then, Kabul was almost wiped out not only socially, but also physically. Large parts of the city, and an estimated 80 percent of its historic core, were laid to ruins.



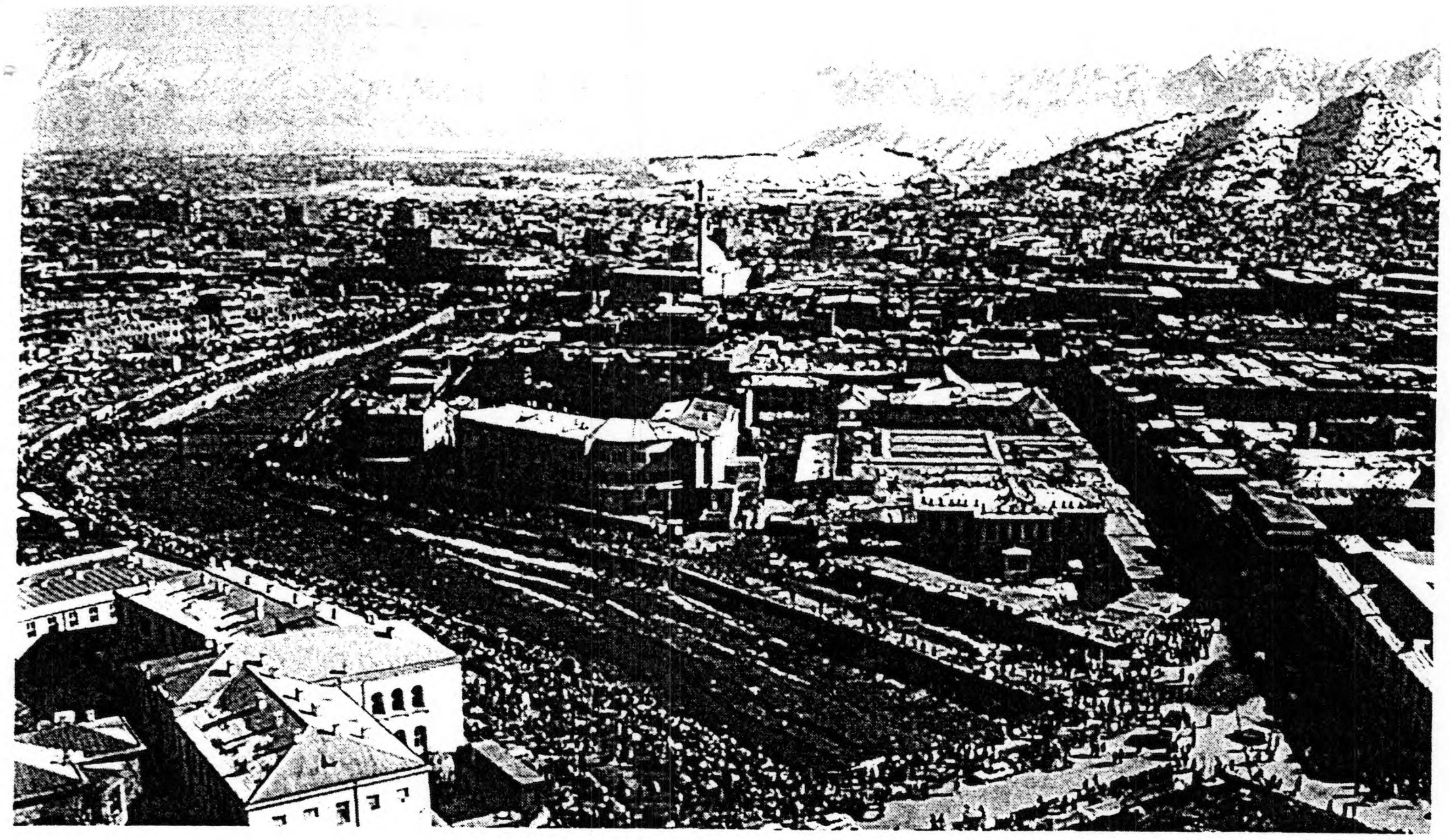
The internecine fighting between the Mujahedin-factions from 1992 to 1996 ruined large parts of Kabul's historic quarters.

During the recovery process over the last years, the reshaping of the city and its society was driven primarily by inherent dynamics. The governmental authorities, the relevant ministries and the municipality are more preoccupied with building their own capacity than a functioning city. Numerous international aid agencies implement their projects without effective coordination. Both sides together, however, seem to be repeatedly outplayed by the rapid developments "on the ground".

The present is full of contrasts. On the one side, there is the bustling new city that fleeces international aid workers and entrepreneurs with house rents comparable to those of Manhattan. It is the world of Toyota Land Cruisers, of newly constructed high-rise department stores and hybrid villas. A clean world, where everything gets washed – marble, mirrored windows and money alike. While the thresholds to this world are sealed off by armed guards, outside a honking fleet of yellow taxis is jamming the dusty streets.

At night, the cab drivers return to the other, often literally dark side of Kabul. Millions of returnees as well as newcomers from the surrounding country inhabit the less privileged quarters. Everywhere houses are getting fixed, others are torn down and constructed anew either in the traditional way of mud or preferably of concrete by those who can afford a show of progressiveness. Kabul sprawls for miles into the countryside and up the slopes of the surrounding hills. Today, half of the city's dwellings are located in non-serviced squatter settlements.

There has been much discussion about the future development of Kabul.[1] Many proposals have been made. Some visionaries have developed ambitious schemes of turning Kabul into a modern metropolis. Even the "Re-



View of the Old City from the north. The bridges over the Kabul River connect old and new.

1 See Barakat et al 1995; Leslie 1991; Maiwandi 2004; Mumtaz and Noschis 2004

2 This is referring to the heading of the proposal „AFG/05034" by the Afghan Ministry of Urban Development and Housing (MUDH).

3 A wooden table is placed over a charcoal brazier and covered with a blanket. The family sits around the „sandali" on cushions, eats and sleeps, with the feet underneath.

4 This broad boulevard and its perpendicular pendant, the Jade Nadir Pashtoon, were brutally cut through the fabric of the Old City in the mid 20th century. It was an ignorant and obviously failed attempt to once again tie the historic core again up with the center of public life, which had already long since developed north of the river.

habilitation of Kabul Old Town"[2] has become officially thinkable. The creation of "an attractive, efficient city centre" and the "restoration of the extensively damaged Old Town" have come together – at least on paper. That, of course, brings into question the "original" quality and character of the Old City as well as its present state and its role within the larger Kabul.

The present state

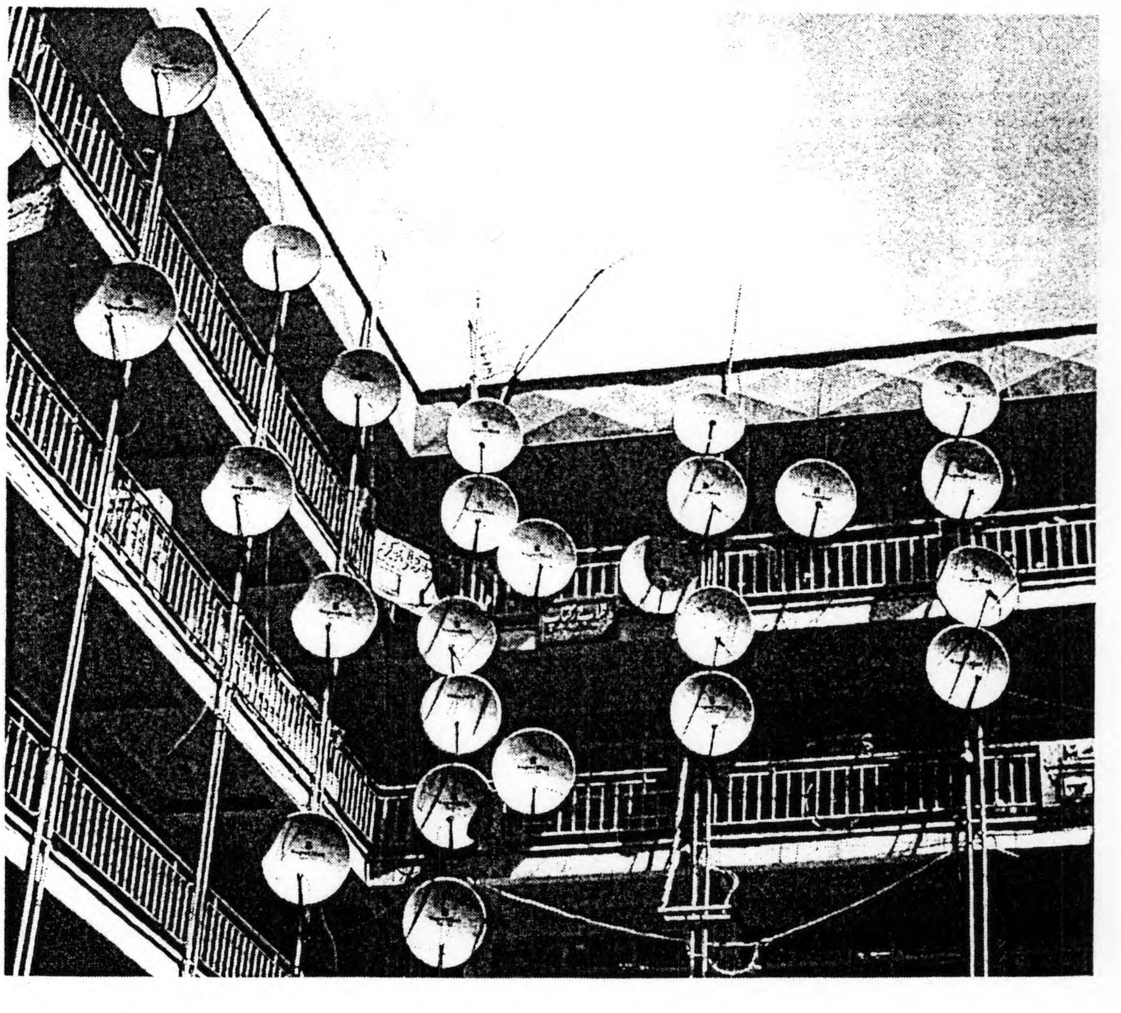
The term "Old City" applies best to today's District 1, confined by the semicircular ridge of the Koh-e Sher Derwaza to the south and the Kabul River to the north. In a broader sense, it also includes other historic areas such as large parts of District 2 on the left bank of the river. The traditional centre of Old Kabul, its public life with the main mosques and the bazaars, spanned between the citadel, the Bala Hissar, as the seat of power at the south-eastern extreme and the vicinity of the Pul-e Khishti, the central crossing point over the river in the north. The old residential quarters cluster south of this axis, towards the mountain.

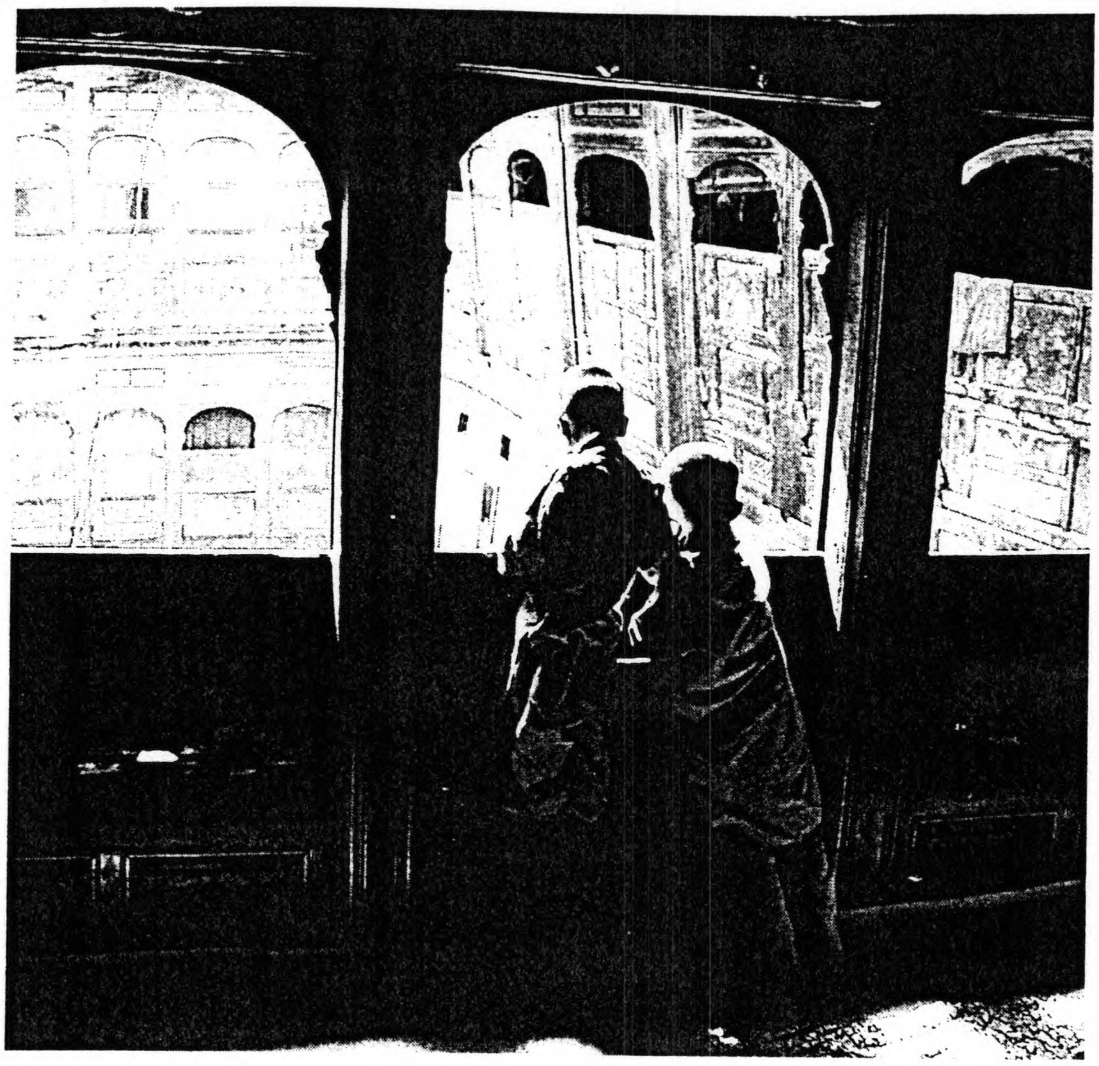
The area, which has assumedly been settled upon for more than two millennia, was severely devastated by the gunfire a decade ago. Amidst a lunar landscape of ruined homes, only a few pockets of the former town are still standing, including some fine examples of 19th century Kabuli neighbourhood mosques, hammams and courtyard houses. But general negligence over the years has added to the poor state of the remains. As the constructions are built of unburned mud bricks, natural decay is gradually eating away what is left. Additionally, many homes get run down by their inhabitants.

Here, in the old quarters, the city that promises security and economic opportunities receives its least privileged newcomers. The rooms of the old residences are rented out to the limit. Families averaging nearly seven members share one or two rooms on low rents. For those who can't afford to "buy" the right to squat, the old city is among the first choices to arrive and be sheltered in Kabul. Most residents only came after 2001 and are eager to move on to the better parts of the city as soon as they can afford to. Others, however, have started to re occupy deserted properties. New bricks are moulded from the earthy rubble of former houses, and piled up for new constructions.

If, indeed, the Old City is still alive, then it is mainly in the traditions and livelihoods of its inhabitants. As in the old days, a primitive "sandali"[3] is still the predominant way of heating in the winter. In spring, the unpaved streets become a mishmash of mush, garbage and human excrement that get blown back into the homes with the dust storms of the summer and fall. The "drinking water", provided by a few wells with hand pumps, would elsewhere not even be used for washing clothes.

The modern Kabul is seeking contact with the rest of the globe.





View into a courtyard of a typical 19th century-dwelling with wooden facades

The neighborhood of Asheqan wa Arefan comprises some 250 dwellings. It is one of the few surviving residential quarters of the Old City. The Aga Khan Trust for Culture has begun to upgrade the neighborhood and to restore some of its finest historic buildings.

The current role

Embedded in a bay-like mountainous setting, Old Kabul has its main line of interaction with the surrounding city along the river to the north. Here, the dry moat of the riverbed separates the archaic from the modern. Only few bridges link "medieval" and "progressive" Afghanistan, tradition and change, stagnation and the flourishing. On the left bank of the river, the neighbourhoods between the Arg-palace and the Bibi Maroo hill, from Kolola Poshta to Wazir Akbar Khan Mina, have developed into the city's actual economic and administrative centre. Ministries, foreign embassies, NGO-offices, expat-restaurants, arty cinemas, DVD and Hindi-Pop-sellers, antique and carpet shops, department stores, western-style supermarkets, guest houses and soon a five-star hotel line up in what is the true, but artificial, heart of modern Kabul. It meets the demands of a new generation of Afghans, who returned culturally changed from Pakistan or elsewhere after several years – or even decades – of exile. The main pacesetter of this part of the town, however, is the colony of a few thousand foreigners. Many of them have never visited the Old town even after a longer stay in Kabul. Some wouldn't even know about its existence.



Yet, probably neither the New nor the Old City is a truthful mirror of today's and tomorrow's Kabul. Various subcenters have sprung up and Kabul has grown dynamically into a decentralized metropolis. In the many widespread neighbourhoods, as for example in Khair Khana, Kot-e Sangi or Karte Seh, weddings are celebrated under illuminated plastic palms in glittering, multi storey-glass palaces. There, traditionalism is blending in with a naïve openness to the outside world.

While Kabul is getting redefined day by day, the role of the Old City within this turmoil is ambiguous. On one hand, it still boasts the main autochthonous commercial centre. The old bazaars and serais between the Pul-e Khishti, Mandawi and Bagh-e Umumi function as a bustling magnet for Kabulis from all districts. The other face of the Old City is located to the south of the Jade Maiwand.[4] Behind the curtain of three, four and five-storied commercial buildings, snuggle the low-rise mud-houses of the past. These dilapidated residential zones are Kabul's seemingly forgotten origin. There, the warehouses in the Bagh-e Qazi-area are stacked with imported products. Just as the people, goods constantly come and go.

If this describes the current situation, that needs to be improved upon, then there still remains the question what this Old City should be revitalized, rehabilitated, restored or even reconstructed to? What was Kabul in the old days? What its qualities? Are these restorable at all? And, moreover, would this lead to an "attractive" city centre as imagined?

The tradition

Throughout the medieval times, the town of Kabul was only of mediocre importance. It served primarily as a trade post and secondarily as a provincial centre of power. Under Babur (1504-30), the city flourished in an unprecedented way. Nevertheless, it remained an unimpressive, small trade town and an unworthy rival of contemporary Herat. For the next two centuries, the governor of the Mughal Empire's northwestern province resided in the Bala Hissar. But with the power of the Mughals waning, the importance of Kabul as a frontier town also diminished. By the time Timur Shah (1772-93), the second Durrani on the Afghan throne, moved his capital from Kandahar to Kabul, the town only had a small population of some 10,000 souls and fairly important markets. The Englishman Forster, who passed through in 1783, gave a sobering account of this Kabul: „... the houses built of rough stones, clay and unburned bricks, exhibit a mean appearance, and are ill suited to the grandeur which I expected to see in the capital of a great empire."[5]

Among the townsmen were influential Hindustani traders, Uzbeks, and predominantly Persian-speaking Tajiks. Each group inhabited their tribally distinguished quarters. The minorities in need of special protection, the Arab, Armenian and Jewish communities, as well as the courtiers of the royal Durrani family, settled inside the fortified precinct of the lower citadel. To the west of the town proper, rose the separately walled quarters of the Shiite Kizilbash, the former elite troopers of the Persian Nadir Shah Afshar. This parallel city „Chindawol" (vanguard) almost equalled the actual town of Kabul in size. North of the river, on the eastern spur of the Koh-e Asmaii, jumbled the houses of the „true" Afghans, the Pathans, in the village-like Deh Afghanan. Caravan traders and seasonal migrants from all parts of the empire added to this kaleidoscope of creeds and nations. The interaction was, however, generally limited to the public space of the mosques and bazaars along the main thoroughfares.

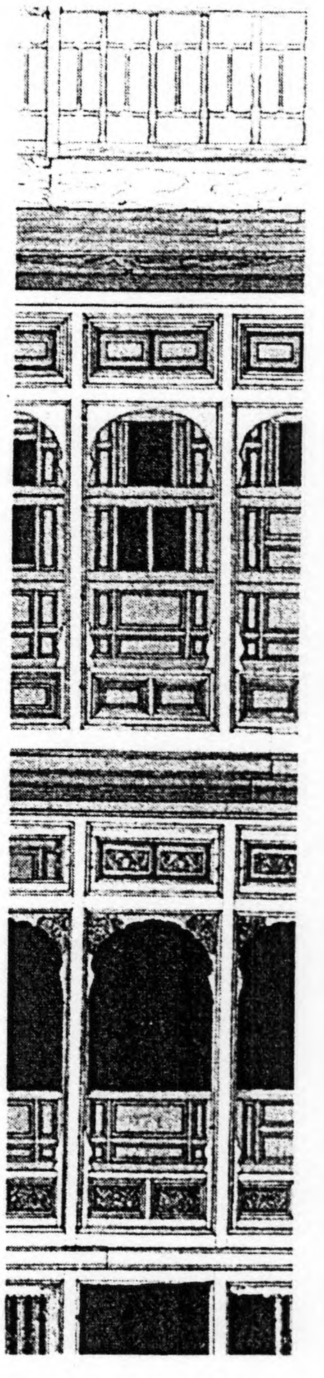
Access to the residential quarters was more or less restricted to their inhabitants and could be denied by closing the gates of the neighbourhood. Masson, another Englishman, reported in the 1830s: „In occasions of war or tumult the entrance gates are built up, and the city contains as many different fortresses as there are kuchas (sections) in it."[6] The secluded home of a family hides behind an unpretentious doorway, behind which a bent entrance leads to the interior courtyard. The horseshoe-windows, fluted columns and the intricate latticework of its wooden facades recall the fashions of the Late Mughals, also adopted by the Sikhs and the Raj, which one would see in Delhi, Lahore or Peshawar. The houses of this period are usually flat-roofed, two-story dwellings of an unsophisticated, timber-framed construction with brick-infill. These structures are among the oldest remnants of Old Kabul.

In fact, despite the city's long history, the fabric of its historic core is hardly older than 200 years, as the city's population kept continuously growing only since the late 18th century. Kabul was, quite like any fragmented Islamic city, characterized by clusters of houses, of neighbourhoods, of parallel and hardly interlinked suburbs. But maybe here the level of fragmentation was even such that Old Kabul was less a coherent city than a mere agglomeration of separated units.

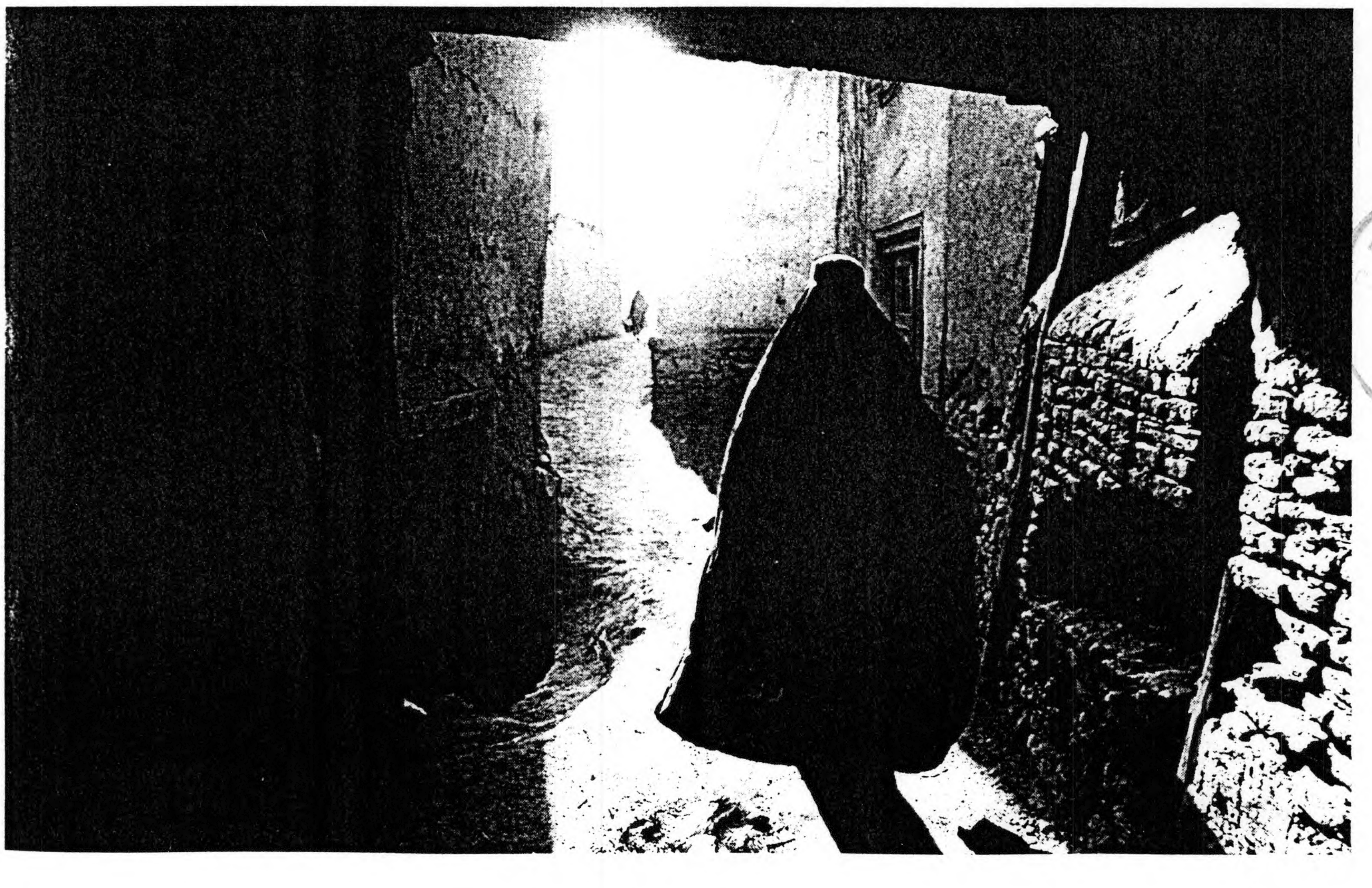
The decay

In the course of the 19th century, Russian Central Asia and in particular British India were experiencing a far-reaching modernization and, moreover, their own share of the industrial revolution. In contrast, Afghanistan – and Kabul – became increasingly isolated. The Amirs knew well to control and limit the influx of foreign culture and innovations in order to sustain their self-centered oriental rule. However, the more western ideas eventually succeeded in gaining a foothold in Kabul, the more they proved to be irreconcilable with the traditions.

The „Iron Amir" Abdur Rahman (1880-1901) was a self-styled architect. He replaced the previously destroyed Bala Hissar with a spacious, green and commodious new palace compound outside of the town and built himself various summer residences in a pseudo-European style.[7] More and more foreigners arrived, first mainly British, later Turks, Germans and French. So did electricity in 1919. The radical reformer King Amanullah (1919-29) considered the old city of Kabul inept for his vision of a modern and progressive Afghanistan and therefore ordered the construction of a new capital Darulaman, eight kilometres southwest of the Old Town. Europeans designed the palaces, parliament and municipality buildings and Afghanistan's first and only railway was to link the old capital with the new. Amanullah's ambitions failed, however. Darulaman has remained unfinished ever since. Yet, Kabul's bourgeoisie was ready to follow his example and moved into western style-villas in the new suburbs. The emerging social and cultural elite gradually abandoned the Old City, where progress passed by.



Elevation of a wooden curtain-wall-façade in a courtyard. The formal language of the design is widespread in the region among 19th- century architecture. The wooden, partly glassed shutters can be variably closed and opened according to season and daytime.

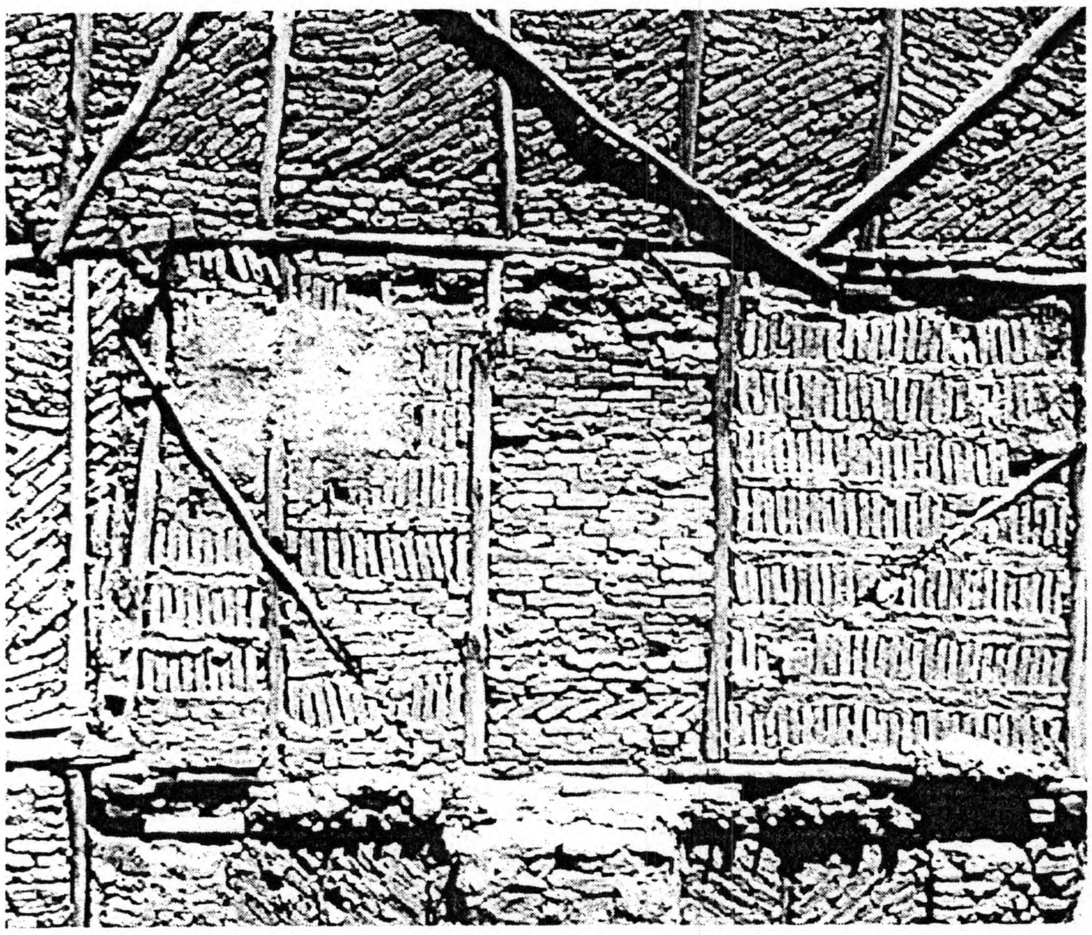


5 Forster 1970: p.79.

6 Masson 1842; p. 262.

7 See: Dupree 1977. Also ebd. „A building boom in the Hindukush", 1980

In the Old City the burqas rush like shadows through the narrow alleys.



Traditional wall construction: a timber frame with diagonal bracing for an increased earthquake resistance is filled in with unburned mud-bricks.

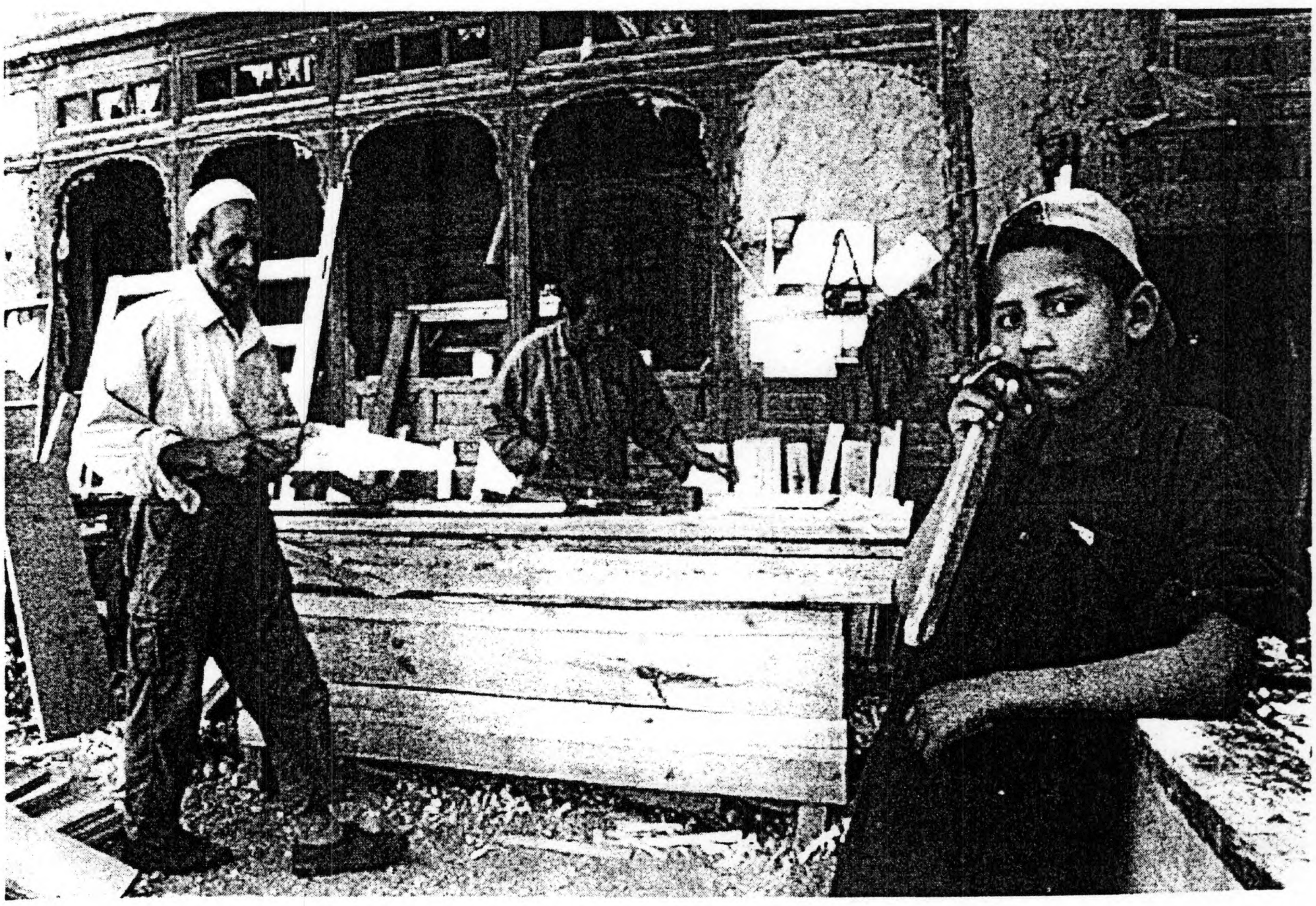
As a result of these developments, already prior to the civil war, Old Kabul had become both a slum and a showcase of the 'traditional' living conditions of Afghanistan's rural majority. The latter is based on an extremely localized clan-identity and has for long opposed the 'Sodom' Kabul. Generally speaking, urbanism as a centrifugal motor of social and cultural change and as a symbol and generator of an 'open society'. Afghan villagers retaliated against British occupation in 1841/42 and again in 1879, while not few townsmen sided with the intruders. The peasants stood up against Amanullah in 1929 and against the infidel communist regime in Kabul and their dubious ally, the Red Army, in the 1980s. In the aftermath of the latter war, the various factions ignorantly turned the city into the battleground of their internecine fighting. At the latest under the Taliban, Afghanistan's urban culture was almost completely annihilated. After 2001, however, the development was reversed to the extreme: While Kabul as a whole has since grown by the millions through returning refugees and an unprecedented urban migration, its historic core became the interface between rural and urban Afghanistan.

The revitalization

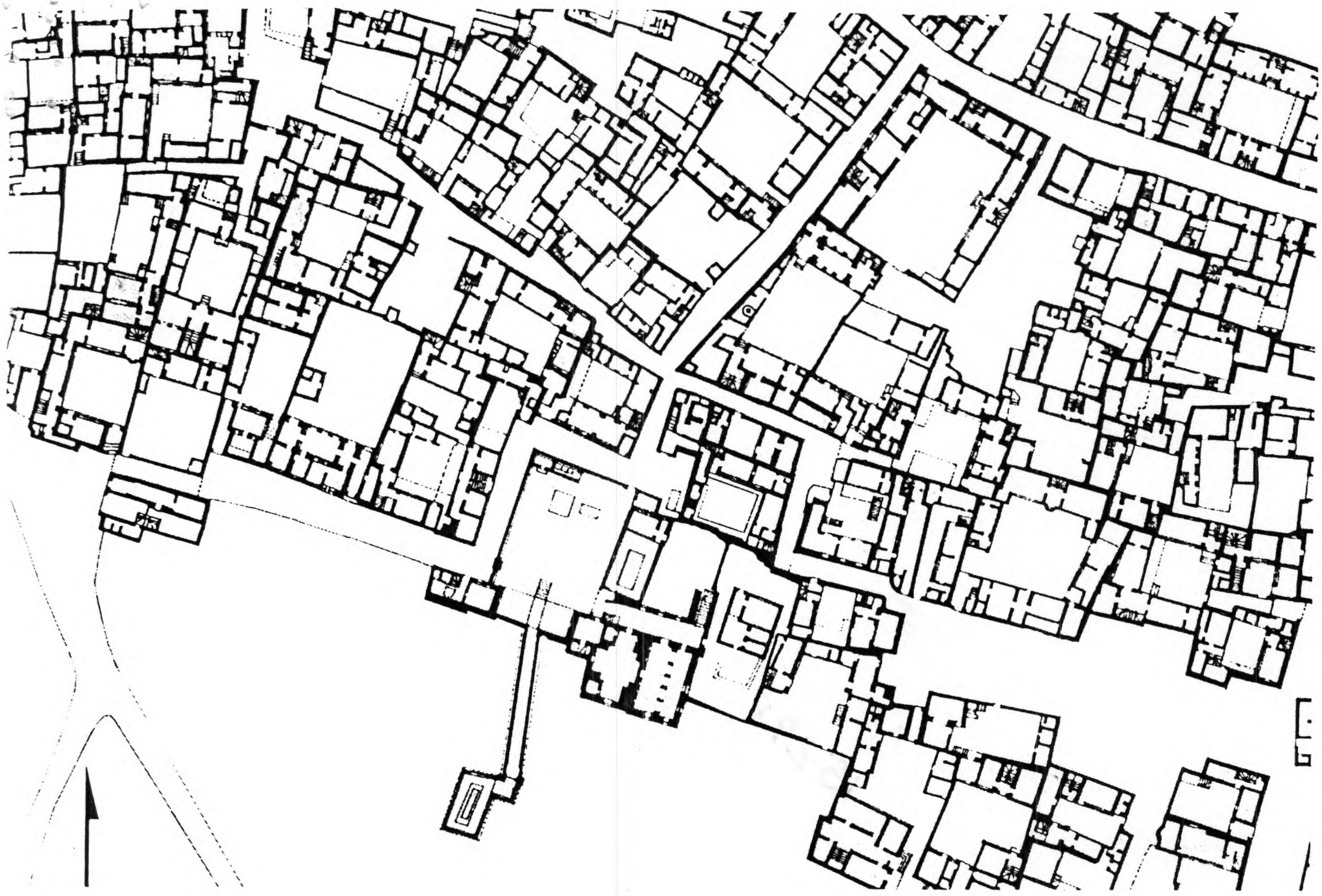
In a mega-city, which is insufficiently supplied with energy, physical infrastructure and serviced homes: Should this Old Town be restored to a city centre? What is the purpose of reconstructing an historic image of a brief transitional period, which marked the transformation of Kabul from a pre-industrial stage to modernity, while the 'traditional' city was eventually left behind on the way? Why regenerate a city that has died socially over the last 80 years and vanished physically a decade ago? The redevelopment of the historic town, with the aim of transforming it into a future city centre, is neither realistic nor wise. Kabul will most likely have its core on both sides of the river, with many sub-centers spreading throughout the extensive metropolitan area. Rather, conservation and revitalization should be the keywords in dealing with the historic centre. Conserving what is left would leave an important window to the city's past and revitalizing its social life would secure the old city a permanent and stable role as a neighbour of Kabul's modern centre. As mentioned above, the dichotomy of old and new has often violently interrupted the development of Kabul. Now, there is an opportunity to harmonize the opponents by providing the population of the Old City with their share of progress on the one hand, and by conserving a historic identity for the New Kabul on the other. Both sides

Under the guidance of the AKTC the community is supported in the restoration of historic homes and mosques. This participation of residents creates employment and increases their identification with the neighborhood. Moreover, local craftsmen are trained in almost forgotten traditional building skills.

Right: Young graduates of the Architectural Department/Kabul University helped to survey the neighborhood and were trained.



Photos: M. Schadl
Drawings: AKTC, M. Schadl



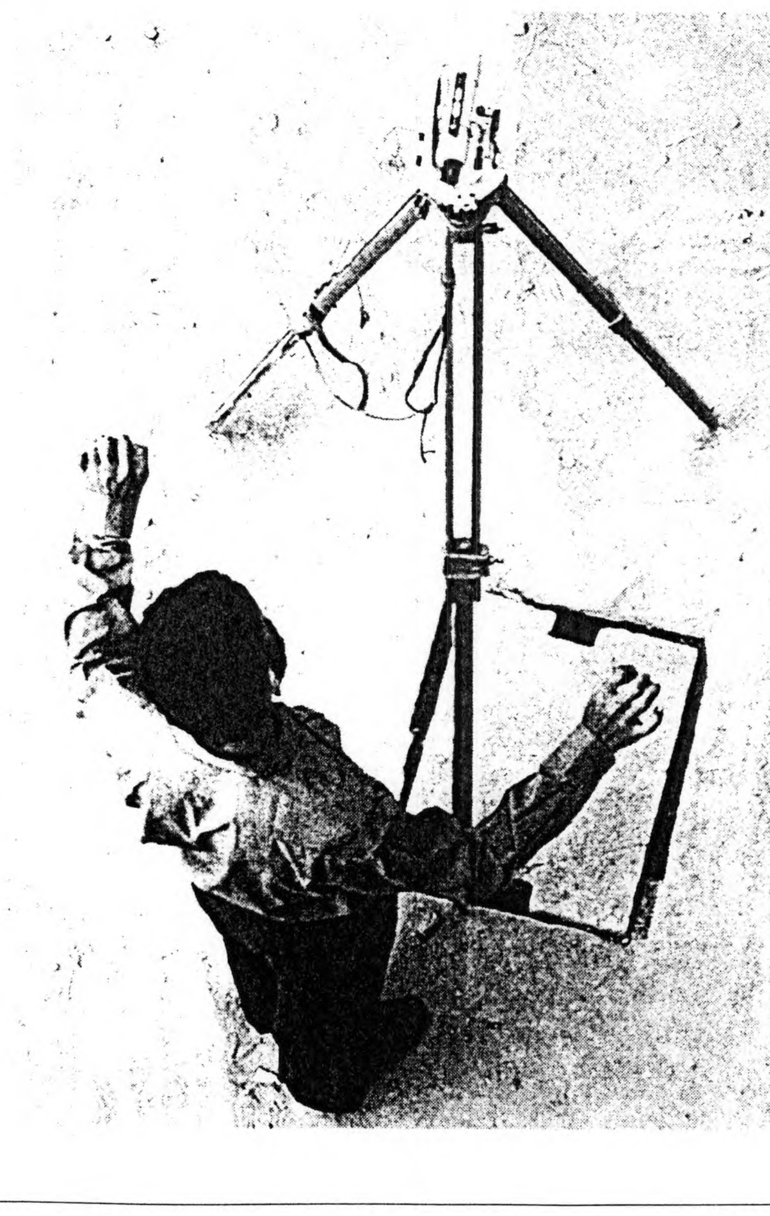
The mapping of the survey- information shows the traditional layout of the quarter. Courtyard-houses cluster along the maze of narrow, winding and previously unpaved lanes.

would benefit from the restoration of landmarks, like mosques or hammams, as well as from the preservation of the few remaining clusters of historic neighbourhoods and outstanding examples of traditional homes.

While planning from the top is doomed to fail and can solely provide a frame for development, any bottom-up-approach of re-anchoring and redefining the Old Town within present-day Kabul is more promising. Only a sustainable community development – together with physical conservation – can recreate social cohesion, higher attractiveness and identification with the historic neighbourhood and thereby help to preserve the intact remnants of Old Kabul.

In this sense, the programs of the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC) have gained a generally acknowledged model character. After first successes, their well-balanced focus on the commercial area around the Timur Shah mausoleum and on Asheqan wa Arefan, a residential quarter in the southern District 1, is starting to link up to a wider approach. In addition to the gradual improvement of living conditions and the restoration of chosen buildings, AKTC has also pioneered in the documentation of the Old City. As part of the Asheqan wa Arefan-project, in order to obtain a graphical and cognitive basis for planning, our team thoroughly surveyed and mapped the entire neighbourhood. I have based my further fieldwork and academic research on Old Kabul on the results of this work. Both documentation and research seem crucial in the face of an ongoing decay of Kabul's built heritage and a general lack of awareness and identification.

In conclusion, the Old Town has neither the potential nor the character to be turned into a fashionable, and even less so an effective city centre. It can only survive as the home of a living community, and not as a museum-like, touristy image of a splendid historic city, which it has never been. The modern city will certainly continue to encroach on District 1, but most probably stop at the entrance to its residential quarters. If the development of Kabul turns out to be equilibrated and successful, the city will show two faces right in its centre, which would then have come to terms with each other: traditionalism and progress. This would provide the capital with the opportunity of bridging the gap between tradition and future.



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